

# TIME TO PLAY!

We caught up with the screenwriters and cast to discuss the celebration of 1980s pop culture that is **Ready Player One**. Words Scott Hocking

**R**eady Player One was born out of author Ernest Cline's love for classic video games, as well as Roald Dahl's book *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*. The Golden Ticket in Cline's story is an Easter egg that has been hidden in a vast virtual reality world – the OASIS – by its late creator, and the one who finds it will inherit his fortune.

With the clues and challenges within the OASIS informed by 1980s pop culture – everything from *Back to the Future* and *WarGames*, to Atari and Canadian rock band Rush – the players must be well versed in the movies, video games and music of the period to unlock the gates that will lead them to the ultimate prize.

avatar, Parzival – adds: "The Iron Giant, for me. It's one of my favourite movies ever."

Cline, who co-wrote the screenplay with Zak Penn, says he set out to mash-up everything in pop culture and pay tribute to it all at once.

"The whole time I was writing the book, I never imagined there would be a movie. When I started work on the screenplay, I realised now it's my job to turn this unfilmable book I've written into a movie, and that's why I was so blessed to have Zak and Steven Spielberg come onboard, because they're more experienced filmmakers and also passionate about movies and books and pop culture."



"This is the ultimate eighties' remix," says T.J. Miller, who plays i-ROK. "It samples everything from every type of pop culture and it's going to reinforce the existence of that and encourage people to go back and see these movies that are referenced. That's really cool."

"I had a Star Wars moment when I realised i-ROK is this bounty hunter and that he would look up to the greatest bounty hunter in science fiction, which is Boba Fett. And so in the film I do an impersonation of Boba Fett, which is both easy and hard because he only says like five lines in the entire trilogy. I really geeked out on that."

Tye Sheridan, who plays protagonist Wade Watts – better known as his OASIS

"So it's working with like-minded people to reimagine it and make it cinematic. Even though things had to change [from the novel], invariably, they would always consult me and get my input on those changes."

Penn and Cline also assisted in educating the younger cast members on some of the eighties' references, which included teaching Sheridan how to properly hold an Atari controller, and introducing them to one-hit wonder bands.



"Music is such an important part of it and there was a lot of discussion about music during the writing process," says Penn. "We debated which version of New Order's *Blue Monday* to use – should it be the dance remix or the '82 original?"

Penn also reveals that Cline could well be the ultimate geek. "Ernie knows more about pop culture than anyone I have ever met. I know a lot but I pale

before him. What happened in the third episode of *Knight Rider*? Ernie knows. What did Steven Spielberg do on Tuesday in 1981? Ernie knows. It became a thing on set that we would ask Steven, 'What's something that no one would know about you?'

And he'd say, 'Well, I shot second unit on *Scarface* for a day.' So we'd text Ernie, and...

*Scarface*! We could never stump him, and he wasn't looking on the Internet, his answers were instantaneous."

→ **Ready Player One** is in cinemas on March 29



# SPIELBERG SPEAKS to *STACK*

If Ernest Cline's 2011 best-selling novel, *Ready Player One*, read like a love-letter to Steven Spielberg – heavily referencing his '80s movies like *Gremlins*, *Indiana Jones*, *E.T.* and *Back to the Future* – then ultimately the legendary director would return the compliment by agreeing to direct the film adaptation.

"When I first read the book, I said, 'OK. This is ridiculous, he's got me on every tenth page; everything I did in the '80s is in there'. I told myself that another director needed to do that," recalls Spielberg when *STACK* meets with the legend on the backlot of Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank.

Christopher Nolan, Robert Zemeckis, Peter Jackson and Edgar Wright were all touted for the job before he finally relented. "I figured if somebody else made this movie and put too much of my cultural references in, then I'd be too embarrassed.

"I thought that if I directed it, then I could put less of *me* in because there's so many things that other filmmakers have done in the 1980s that *I* didn't do, that we now have in this movie."

As fans already know, Spielberg instead references the worlds of *Blade Runner*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *WarGames* and *The Iron Giant*, while not entirely erasing his own contribution to pop culture. "I cut out most of my own work. I had to. I've still got some references, like with *Back to the Future* and a *Gremlin* running around, but for the most part, this movie celebrates a decade of style, culture, politics, music, film and TV," he says while juggling a half smoked cigar in one hand, joking, "I don't smoke. I just hold this when I'm nervous."

While slow to accept the challenge, he also blames it on the difficulty of adapting Cline's novel. "It was a tough one to get right and it took a long time."

Casting was problematic too, with



literally thousands of actors testing out for the main role of Wade Watts, which eventually went to Tye Sheridan.

"Finding Wade was hard because at first I was looking for an overweight Wade like in the book, and then I just realised that I shouldn't have to cast a physical type and that I needed to cast the best actor and one with whom audiences could identify and see the story through his eyes. Instead I decided to find the soul and heart of this character, and I know I found the right guy."

**"I cut out most of my own work. I had to."**

Halfway through filming *Ready Player One* at London's Leavesden studios, Spielberg, 71, abruptly took a break and went off to film newspaper drama *The Post* with Meryl Streep and Tom Hanks.

"Tom, Meryl and I all thought it was a social imperative that I actually suspend making *Ready Player One* to get active and make that movie last year," he explains. "I made *The Post* because the lie of Richard Nixon and the corruption of his administration was a movie that was happening all over again in 2017, and I couldn't avoid seeing the relevance of all the lies coming from the current administration."

Casting Mark Rylance as brilliant OASIS creator James Halliday was a no brainer. "I just love Mark because he can be anybody and do anything and he doesn't need an avatar to do it."

For all the technical virtuosity of *Ready Player One*, Spielberg's end goal, he says, is relatively simple: "A movie like this is bigger than life, and people who direct films like this, we're all looking for the affirmation of the audience. The most important thing for me is for people to laugh and have a good time and to come out of the movie and blog that they liked it."

Words Gill Pringle